

A toxic nightmare

Firm leaves dangerous waste behind

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Town of Wallkill – Westwood Chemical went belly up nearly a month ago, but the company's impact on this sprawling Orange County town will be felt for decades.

The company, which produced antiperspirant ingredients and chemicals used in water treatment, abandoned its Tower Road plant but left behind a toxic legacy.

It's become a familiar story in Wallkill.

More than a decade ago, another of the town's chemical firms, Interceram Corp., bailed out of its operation on Fortune Road West, leaving behind a toxic nightmare.

Three years later, the town would discover that cyanide and other toxic chemicals had been spilled outside the building. Cyanide, a poisonous substance that was used in degreasing and cleaning at the facility, attacks the nervous system if ingested.

The property, which was valued at nearly \$400,000 in 1990, is worthless today.

One year ago, Hamburg, Germany-based Tesa Tape closed the doors of its Crotty Road plant after a decade of polluting the air and ground water in the town.

In 1998, Tesa Tape ranked fourth on the list of New York state's top five polluters, according to a report by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Tesa reported to the EPA that it emitted 1,381,671 pounds of toluene, a liquid aromatic hydrocarbon used as a solvent in the tape production, into the air in 1997. The plant has made progress with cleaning up the polluted site, but state and town officials say it could be years before the federally ordered remediation is completed.

Westwood, which shut its doors several weeks ago, will also take years to clean up.

Last week, thousands of gallons of corrosive chemicals, some stored in open plastic drums and tanks at the company's abandoned plant on Tower Road, were discovered by investigators from the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

At the town's request, the DEC and the Orange County Hazardous Materials team were called in to the site last week to take stock of the chemicals left behind.

The town's code enforcer, Walter Barrett, inspected the abandoned site last week after town officials learned that the chemical company had closed down.

He found open containers of powdered sulfuric acid and 55-gallon drums of corrosives, some of them open and exposed to the elements, littering the plant facilities.

The company used a variety of corrosive chemicals, such as hydrochloric and sulfuric acids, to produce aluminum chlorohydrate, the active ingredient in deodorants.

DEC officials said they are still taking stock of the chemical mess the firm left behind.

"We found waste acids in uncovered containers around the plant, along with exposed sulfuric, nitric acids and ethers," said DEC spokeswoman Wendy Rosenbach.

Like other chemical companies in Wallkill, Westwood has a troubled history.

About 8,000 gallons of hazardous hydrochloric acid spilled there in 1988. In May 1990, more than 200 gallons of non-hazardous aluminum chlorohydrate solution splashed across 100 yards of parking lot and poured out onto nearby Tower Drive. A few months later, a 20,000-gallon chemical storage tank inside the plant burst, spilling its contents onto the warehouse floor, parking lot and a nearby street.

When many chemical companies like Westwood moved to the town in the 1980s, there was little else in the way of other industries operating there. The chemical firms provided good jobs where there were none and boosted the town's tax revenue.

Now, with retail chains, hotels and high-tech firms clamoring to move in, officials say there's little need for the so-called dirty industries.

"It's not the kind of industry that we want in the town anymore," said Supervisor John Ward. "With the malls and a medical corridor along Crystal Run Road, there's no demand for it."

DEC officials said the Westwood site is not believed to pose an immediate danger to the public. Signs are posted warning trespassers to steer clear of the land. The gate has been locked and a private security guard has been assigned.

Even though cleanup efforts are under way and the property may one day be safe, there's a chance that it will remain worthless for a long, long time, officials said.

